



P. L. Raj, remembers

From Shammi Kapoor to Shah Rukh Khan, from Saira Banu to Twinkle Khanna, he has put the past five decades of film stars through the dance moves. Naturally Dadasaheb Phalke award winning dance director P. L. Raj is full of interesting stories...

Like many youngsters, I left Hyderabad and came to the city of dreams, Mumbai to become a film hero. The year was 1951. I was a young boy of 13, but with the courage of an adult. I struggled for a long time but nothing came my way.

I didn't lose hope and trained in dance under Shambu Maharaj and Keshtu Kumar.

Finally, I got a chance in a film called *Ajeeb Ladki* starring Naseem Banu and Rahman. In the film, I was just another group dancer in a dance sequence featuring Agha and Cuckoo. Since nothing substantial was coming my way, I began doing theatre.

I would SLAP Mumtaz...

Subodh Mukherjee saw one of my performances and was so impressed he took me on as dance director for his film *Love Marriage*. The film was a hit, especially the song 'Dheere dheere thal chand gagan mein...'

Then came *Jungle* and I never had to look back. There are many memories associated with the film. The famous 'Yahoo...' number was to be shot in Kashmir but since it wasn't snowing there, we shifted to Simla. We shot the entire song over one bright day in an otherwise cold and dark climate.

Shammi Kapoor took genuine interest in his songs. He wasn't a great dancer but his body movements were very expressive and his acting matched the beats. With a glass of beer in hand, he would listen to a song for three days thinking about how he would do it. Thus almost all his songs were big hits.

I remember when we were shooting for the song 'Din saara guzara tere angna...' in a garden, a group of men



Mumtaz was his student: On the sets of Daku Mangal Singh

were relaxing nearby and one of them was entertaining the others by dancing like a girl. Both Shammi and I sat and studied him. We then used a few of his steps in the song! For the line 'mere yaar shaba khair' Shammi did a salaam with one hand while I made Saira use both the hands for the same. Shammi just loved this step and was all praise for my powers of observation.

Junglee was Saira's first film too. She was only 16 then and extremely innocent. For the song 'Kashmir ki kali...', Saira was supposed to take off with Shammi's shoe and then run after him to return it. The poor girl would simply forget to carry the shoe back to him! This happened several times and finally I lost my cool and just yelled at her. She began to cry uncontrollably and I had to pacify her and get her back on the sets. Finally after several retakes she got the scene right. Till today Saira remembers that episode!

Similarly I had shouted at Zeenat Aman during the making of *Pukaar* and at Shabana Azmi for a song sequence. They knew I was very strict so they would come in on time and do their work well. It was falsely rumoured that I used a cane to extract good work from my artistes — I never did that.

I had formed a great team with Shammi and we did several films together—*Jaanwar*, *Badtameez*, *Bluff Master* which had the song 'Govinda aala re...' and *Evening in Paris* for which we shot the 'Raat ke hamsafar...' song at the Eiffel Tower at night. This was the golden era and I was at my busiest best working 24 hours at a stretch.

Most of the heroes including Dharmendra and Manoj Kumar didn't know to dance and I had to work extra hard on them. I did *Batraag* and *Sagina* with Dilip Kumar in which the song 'Saala main to saahab ban gaya' became a hit. He was a good learner and respected me a lot.

Amitabh Bachchan was not a great dancer either and I would shout at him if he didn't get his steps right. He didn't throw starry nakhras though and would take it all in his stride. I did *Barsaat Ki Raat*, *Bombay to Goa*, *Sholay*, *Shaan*, *Shakti*, *Pukaar* and *Kasme Vaade* with Amitabh. I remember an incident that happened during *Don*. The film was complete but when distributors saw the film, they

enjoyed the song with the Bihari feel 'Eee hai Bambai nagariya tu dekh babua...' so much that they insisted on having another similar song added to the film. Salm-Javed, lyricist Anjaan, music directors Laxmikant-Pyarelal and I sat together and did some brainstorming. We created a situation to fit in the song 'Khaike pan Banaraswala...' which had been earlier conceived for *Banarasi Babu* but rejected by the hero Dev Anand. I choreographed this number in an innovative manner and we shot it in a record time of four hours over two days because the film was complete and had to be rushed for release.

There were some good dancers too like Jeetendra and Mithun Chakraborty. Of the present lot, Govinda and Shah Rukh with whom I did *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* are good dancers.

Of the girls, Vyjayantimala and Padmini were very good dancers. I had to work very hard on Meena Kumari with whom I did *Chitralekha*. Mumtaz was also my student since she was a child. I would even slap her if she didn't get a shot right! Yet she respected me and touches my feet even today.

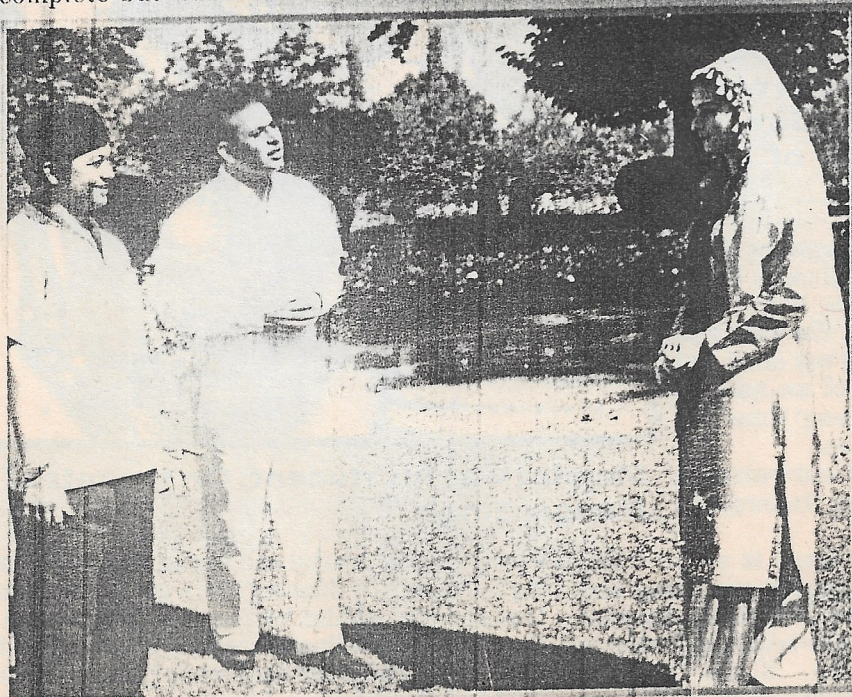
However, my favourite girls were Helen and Kum Kum. The latter had her own style, which I simply loved. My favourite dance sequence is Helen's dance number 'Aa jaane jaan...' from *Integam*. I had a golden cage made and also roped in musicians from the Indian Navy. I sat with musicians Laxmikant-Pyarelal who were composing the music and conceived a story wherein the girl tempts a caged man.

Of course there were tough times too. I remember deciding on certain steps for the song 'Mujhe dekhiye, main ek daastan hoon...' from *Lootera*, which was picturised on Helen. However, they just wouldn't suit the situation and I was in a terrible fix. I called for pack-up, did some re-thinking for two whole days and then came up with steps which thankfully suited the song.

I have had some very distinguished dancers as my students, such as Helen, Madhumati, Jayshree T, Saroj Khan and even Farah Khan.

In the early days, there were only around five dance masters. Today there are 150 of them. Yet so, there's no originality left. Every song looks like a replica of the other. Now I have cut down on films because of health reasons. But I still give training lessons at home to aspiring dancers. My family is around me—my two daughters and son Leslie Lewis who has made a name for himself in the musical arena. He is a self-made man and I am proud of him.

Awards aren't new to me but the greatest achievement was the Dadasaheb Phalke award conferred on me in 2000. I have led a charmed and satisfying life, indeed.



He yelled at Saira Banu and she just broke down: On the sets of 'Junglee'.